

Don't let myths determine public policy

Open letter from John Whittaker, Managing Director, Stanleybet International

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John Whittaker, Managing Director of Stanleybet International comments that one of the golden rules of public administration is that good public policy should be based on a solid foundation of facts, however contradictory they may be to one's own viewpoint. Unfortunately, with regard to sports betting in Europe, there is a great danger that, in John F Kennedy's words, policymakers too often elevate the comfort of their opinions over the discomfort of thought.

"The great enemy of the truth is very often not the lie -- deliberate, contrived and dishonest, but the myth, persistent, persuasive, and unrealistic. Belief in myths allows the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."

John F. Kennedy, 35th President of the United States

When it comes to sports betting, a number of persistent myths have continued to circulate during the course of the current EU debate such as: sports betting operators are behind attempts at match-fixing; a regulated market leads to an increase in problem gambling and restricting the sports betting market to state-owned operations results in more money being returned to society. The European Parliament's own-initiative report, which is to be voted in Plenary on March 12, repeats and endorses many of these false premises.

Stanleybet has always argued that the proper regulation of sports betting markets across Europe must be based on facts, not myths. EU and national policy-makers must base their work on sound evidence and not false allegations which are often motivated by national or self-interest rather than what is best for the European consumer.

Take match-fixing, for example. As a fixed-odds operator, companies like Stanleybet are the first to lose out if match fixing occurs. We, together with all responsible and regulated sports betting operators, have procedures in place to identify suspicious betting patterns. If criminality is suspected, we fully and closely co-operate with the relevant authorities and share intelligence. These measures have proven effective: there has never been a single case of a licensed EU sports betting operator shown to be responsible for match fixing.

While we recognise that strong measures must be taken to minimise problem gambling, research states that only a small minority of gamblers are affected. Latest evidence in the UK, for example, shows that the incidence of problem gambling remains steady at just 0.6 % of the adult population, despite the fact that the market is one of the most open in Europe. In fact, European countries with much more restrictive legislative environments, such as Germany and Finland, have higher recorded incidences of problem gambling, and both of whom, incidentally, are facing infringement proceedings by the European Commission. We continue to contribute to organisations such as the Responsibility in Gambling Trust to help address this issue and ensure that sports-betting remains a leisure and entertainment pastime for the vast majority.

With regards to the funding of sports, the majority of state income generated by gambling comes from lottery operations rather than sports betting, which generates less than 5% of the total gambling revenue. Open and regulated sports betting markets already do coexist with national lottery monopoly systems without damaging the revenue generation of the latter for good causes. The UK provides one of the best examples of this, with 41% of monies generated by the National Lottery returned to society, the highest of any lottery in the world, including in those markets that restrict private operators.

We call on Members of the European Parliament to challenge these myths and base policies on hard facts. The emphasis must be on evidence-based policymaking which reflects the true nature of the issues not gut reactions. Otherwise, the internal market will remain little more than a dream for responsible sports-betting companies.



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